

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



John P. Thomas
1886-1944

Traditional architectural styles were especially popular in Maine during the period between the two world wars as there was little interest in modernistic trends in design. In an environment of quiet prosperity and conservative tastes, John P. Thomas of Portland found great favor as an architect among leading businessmen. Thomas became especially adept at designing masonry structures in Georgian or Tudor Revival styles which provided a visible link to this country's Anglo-American heritage.

John Pickering Thomas was born in Portland on March 30, 1886. He was named for his father, a shoe

manufacturer who died in 1890. Thomas grew up in a house on Deering Street in close proximity to his grandfather, the famous diplomat William Widgery Thomas, Jr. He attended Milton Academy outside Boston and Harvard University, where he graduated in 1909. Thomas attended Harvard Law School for one semester before changing to the School of Architecture. For more than two years he took courses there and worked summers in the office of Boston architect C. Howard Walker. Between October, 1912 and April, 1913, he studied in Europe, spending much of his time in Rome and northern Italy. Upon returning to Boston, he spent several months working on the new Massachusetts Institute of Technology campus for architect Wells Bosworth. By 1914 he found permanent employment in the offices of Wait & Copeland.¹

Edward R. Wait (1868-1955) and Harry B. Copeland (1871-1936) may have had the most direct influence on Thomas' work. The Boston firm designed houses in the Georgian and Tudor styles, providing a foundation for Thomas' speciality in that type of residential work. Having designed a large Colonial Revival house in Portland in 1910 for W. W. Thomas, the Boston architects had become acquainted with the family. John Thomas later recounted that he worked on the firm's Portland projects, which in 1914 would have included the Clinton W. Davis House at 90 Vaughn Street.²

During this period John Thomas married Alice McCandless of St. Louis in 1913, fathering a daughter Mary Alice in 1914, a son Peter in 1917, and another daughter Susan Jane in 1921. Both the McCandless and Thomas families had summer houses in Harpswell, where the couple probably met. Shortly after the birth of his son, Thomas entered the U. S. Navy and served on a submarine chaser under conditions he would later recount as tedious and relatively uneventful.³

Upon John P. Thomas' discharge in February, 1919, the decision was made to establish his own practice in Portland. According to his daughter, he preferred the opportunities available in a smaller city, where he



Figure 1. Deering High School, Portland, circa 1925 view (MHPC).

could have more of an impact. His first major project was the design of a stone house for J.C. Hamlen on the Western Promenade. His daughter relates that he sought out Charles O. Poor to form a partnership, which was established in late 1919 or early 1920.⁴

Charles O. Poor provided Thomas with a partner whose long experience in an architect's office would ensure that the firm would operate as an efficient business with many contacts in the city. Born in Grafton, New Hampshire in 1873, Poor attended Portland schools and entered the office of architect Frederick A. Thompson about 1892. For the next twenty-six years, until Thompson's death early in 1919, he worked as a draftsman.⁵ During that period Poor also designed at least two projects independently, a cottage on Peaks Island for F.N. Calderwood and his own residence on Concord Street in 1914. With Thompson's death Poor took over the firm under his own name. It was evidently late that year, after Thomas had begun the Hamlen project, that Poor & Thomas was formed. They were joined by an engineer, Albert C. Hobbs, and another architect who had practiced briefly on his own, Murray C. Binford. Within a few years Royal Boston, Jr. entered the office as a draftsman.

The new firm's most important project in 1920 was one for which they were not the principal designers. This was the Walter G. Davis House on the Western Promenade. Poor & Thomas acted in association with the New York architects William L. Bottomley and J. L. Miller.⁶ Walter Davis, born into a wealthy Portland family, practiced law before World War I in New York, where he probably met Bottomley and Miller. Bottomley also designed the Davis family mausoleum in Evergreen Cemetery. As the architect who provided construction supervision for the house, Thomas became better acquainted with Davis. The two men would have found that not only were they Harvard brothers, but they shared a deep love of their English heritage. This association led to one of Thomas's most important commissions seven years later, Walter Davis's summer house in Cape Elizabeth.

The Poor & Thomas partnership was short-lived due to the death of Charles Poor in a railway accident in May, 1922. Poor's death at the Woodfords crossing came shortly after the firm had won the commission for a major project, Deering High School on Stevens Avenue (Figure

1). A Boston architectural firm, Thomas M. James Company, was hired as consulting architects, possibly due to Poor's untimely death, as Thomas himself apparently had little experience in the design of schools. Deering High School is an excellent example of the Anglophile proclivities of John P. Thomas. This large sprawling structure derives its stylistic influences from the English Renaissance in which neo-classical influences were combined with the Gothic architecture of the Tudor period. The result is a more sophisticated interpretation of an historical idiom than is found in the more typical examples of the popular Tudor Style. The doorway surround for the girl's entrance, for example, demonstrates that Thomas was a careful student of historical styles. On a much smaller scale one can find similar detailing on the Chestnut Street Church Community House of 1924, an elegantly fashioned building on a constricted downtown lot.

Another important commission secured while Charles Poor was still alive was the United States Trust Company Bank in Fryeburg. This was the first of several bank buildings designed in the Georgian Revival style. The Fryeburg bank of 1922 was followed by the branch bank of the Fidelity Trust in



Figure 2. Land side of the Walter G. Davis Summer House, Cape Elizabeth, circa 1930 view (Private Collection).

South Portland (circa 1928), the Canal National Bank in Portland (1930) (Figure 6), the branch bank of the Maine Savings Bank in Portland (1931), and the branch bank of the Fidelity Trust Company in Brunswick (1931-32). The lavish use of limestone trim gave each of these buildings sharply delineated architectural detailing in which the red brick, although comprising the bearing walls, visually plays a secondary role as a contrasting background to highlight the neo-classical stonework. Many brick Georgian Revival style banks were built all over Maine by a variety of firms during this period. Thomas' banks, however, stand out for their distinctive exterior treatments. Unfortunately, none of the ornate interiors of these buildings survive. The YMCA Building in Portland (1925-26) and the two office buildings in Pennsylvania for The Consumers Water Company (1929-30) also fall into the stylistic category of these banks.

Thomas' work for the banking community makes it not in the least surprising that he designed large suburban estates for many successful businessmen in southern Maine. As with his non-residential work, most of his major projects were masonry buildings. An important residence was the Cape Elizabeth home of Walter G. Davis (Figures 2, 3, 4). Prior to designing a second home for this distinguished Anglophile and genealogist, Thomas travelled to England in 1925. The Tudor style house for which he prepared plans in 1927 is built of Indiana limestone. There can be no doubt that the inspiration came from the country homes of the English Midlands. In addition to the period detailing which includes Jacobethian strap-work, hood

moldings, steel casement windows, and chimney pots, the plan is carefully tailored to the requirements of Walter Davis, a bachelor who used it as a summer retreat. In the central section, a rectangular block parallel to the ocean, the entrance hall bisects the house to provide a dramatic vista through the rear door. This view of the water is framed by the doorway and a patio with box hedges. To the left of the hall, tucked to one side, is the staircase, followed by a "book room." The latter consists of book shelves and a bay window for reading, through which one passes to enter the dining room. Jacobethian strapwork, said to have been obtained in England, ornaments the plaster ceiling. Extending off this room is the service wing. Above the dining room are three guest bedrooms.

On the right or south side of the hallway is a large living room in the form of a banquet hall with an open truss ceiling. At the southwest corner of the living room is a semi-detached structure which, from the exterior ocean side, appears to be a small cottage. This was Walter Davis' personal suite, where he lived when in residence. It contained a bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom and had a small covered porch to view the ocean and provide direct access to the south patio and the swimming pool. One of the most unusual features is the elaborate lattice work at one end of the swimming pool which shields the bath houses.

According to the architect's daughter, the Davis House was among John P. Thomas' favorite projects, and one can assume that this was in large part due to the affinity established between these two highly cultured gentlemen. Although designed for the client's own particular needs, it is a mark of Thomas' skill



Figure 3. Ocean side of the Walter G. Davis Summer House, Cape Elizabeth, circa 1930 view (Private Collection).

that the house was easily adapted by later owners for year-round use.

Other imposing Tudor style residences by Thomas included those for the shoe manufacturer Robert P. Hazzard, Jr. in Gardiner, the lawyer Harry M. Verrill in North Windham (now St. Joseph's College), the department store owner Louis R. Porteous in Portland, the newspaper publisher Guy P. Gannett in Cape Elizabeth, the industrialist Spaulding Bisbee in Cumberland Foreside, and the hotel owner and developer Henry P. Rines in Cape Elizabeth. All of these residences were distinctive interpretations of Tudor period country homes. They represent outstanding examples of the residential architecture built by conservative men of wealth during the "Jazz Age."

Thomas' work in other styles, such as wooden buildings which derived their inspiration from the American Colonial Revival, demonstrate that, like any competent architect, he could work to suit the client (Figure 5). Nonetheless, his other work generally was for smaller residences, and this lends credence to the presumption that his true interests lay in the employment of English Tudor and Georgian motifs. One important instance in which he relied on American historical styles is the major reconstruction

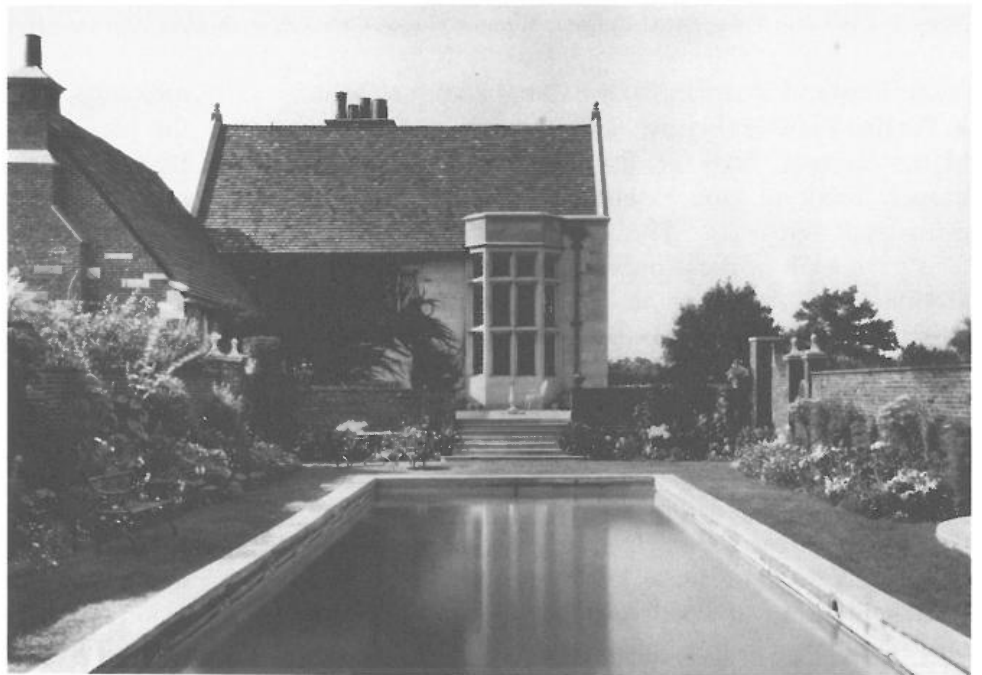


Figure 4. Swimming pool and south side of the Walter G. Davis Summer House, Cape Elizabeth, circa 1930 view (Private Collection).

of a house for William P. Viles in Augusta of 1930.⁷ With this project Thomas paid homage to what was just then becoming known among historians as the Greek Revival style. Never one to employ historical styles without fully understanding their original use, Thomas designed a brick house for Viles that, although a product of its own age, captures the spirit of the style on the exterior. For example, the Doric portico is authentic in its detailing, yet its placement at the far left bay of the principal facade makes it clear that the house is no reproduction of an earlier period. On the interior, the house exhibits the tastes of 1930, such as paneled woodwork stained dark.



Figure 5. Philip S. Wilder House, Brunswick, circa 1930 view (MHPC).

For a man who obtained so many important commissions in designing banks and country estates, it is not surprising that the Great Depression brought difficult times. During the 1930s Murray Binford left to start his own practice, as did Royal Boston. Ironically, two of the largest projects secured in this decade, the Maine Publicity Bureau Building in Portland (Figure 7) and the Passamaquoddy Village housing development in Eastport, were financed through New Deal programs with which Thomas was philosophically at odds. Appropriately, both projects were designed in the Colonial Revival style.

Surviving drawings indicate that John P. Thomas practiced architecture as late as the early 1940s. Josiah T. Tubby worked for him briefly during the final years before establishing a practise about 1941. When the war began, Thomas, who was in the naval reserve, served in naval intelligence in Portland. In that capacity he died unexpectedly on August 9, 1944.⁸

Roger G. Reed

NOTES

1. "John P. Thomas" in *A Biographical Dictionary of Who's Who in Maine*, Vol. I, 1926-27, Lewiston, 1926, p. 255; *Sexennial Report Class of 1909*, Harvard College, Cambridge, 1915, p. 277.
2. The following projects have been identified as having been designed by Wait & Copeland in Portland: W.W.Thomas House, 120 West Street, 1910; Daniel T. Emery House, 112 Vaughn Street, 1913; Portland Gas & Light Company Building, Temple Street, 1913-14; Clinton W. Davis House, 50 Vaughn Street, 1914. For obituary information on Edward R. Wait, see the *Winchester Star*, August 26, 1955. For Harry B. Copeland's obituary, see *The Boston Herald*, April 8, 1936. Thanks to Maureen Meister for sharing this information with the author.
3. His service record was recorded in *Autobiographies and Addresses, Class of 1909, Harvard College*, Boston, 1920, pp. 342-44.
4. Interview with Mrs. Mary Alice Thomas Nichols, November, 1984.
5. Charles O. Poor obituary, *Portland Press Herald*, May 12, 1922. City directories list Poor as a draftsman for Frederick Thompson from 1892 to 1918.

6. *Banker and Tradesman*, August 21, 1920. The same periodical for October 9, 1920, lists Poor & Thomas as associate architects.
7. The Viles House involved the remodeling a house designed by Alexander Jackson Davis in 1846 for Daniel Cony Weston.
8. John P. Thomas obituary, *Portland Press Herald*, August 10, 1944.

**KNOWN
COMMISSIONS IN
MAINE BY
JOHN P. THOMAS
POOR & THOMAS**

James C. Hamlen, Jr., House,
146-49 Western Promenade,
Portland, 1919-20, Extant
Byer & Small Store, Alterations,
Middle Street, Portland,
1920, Destroyed
* Falmouth Hotel, Alterations,
Portland, 1920, Destroyed
Grade School Addition,
Presumpscot Street,
Portland, 1920, Destroyed
Summer Camp, client
unknown, Sebago Lake,
1921, Unlocated
Dr. E. G. Abbott Offices,
Alterations, Portland, 1921,
Unlocated
Charles S. Ensign Cottage,
South Harpswell, 1921,
Extant
Dodge Brothers/Wright Moses
Garage, 334 Forest Avenue,
Portland, 1921-22,
Destroyed
* Ira S. Sawyer House, 79-89
Coyle Street, Portland, 1922,
Extant
Woodfords Club Addition, 179
Woodfords Street, Portland,
1922, Extant
Columbia Hotel, Alterations, Congress St., Portland, 1922,
Not Identified
Freeport Town Hall and Gymnasium, Freeport, 1921, Not
Executed
Westbrook Fraternal Building, Westbrook, 1921, Not
Located
Franklin Service and Sales Garage, 369 Forest Avenue,
Portland, 1922, Extant
* A. F. Porter House, Baxter Island, Falmouth, 1922,
Destroyed
Purpoodock Club Assembly Hall, Cape Elizabeth, 1922,
Destroyed
U. S. Trust Company Bank, Fryeburg, 1922, Extant



Figure 6. Canal National Bank, Portland, circa 1930 view (MHPC).

Deering High School, Thomas M. James Company,
Consulting Architects, Stevens Avenue, Portland, 1922-
23, Extant
L. T. Willis House, Topsham, no date, Not Executed
* Portland Farmers Club, not date, Not Located
Camden-Rockland Water Company Building, Alterations,
5 Lindsey Street, Rockland, 1923, Extant
Sherwood Pickering House, 4 Orchard Street, Portland,
1923, Extant
Dickson Garage, 540 Deering Avenue, Portland, 1924,
Altered
Louis R. Porteous House, 28 Chadwick Street, Portland,
1924, Extant



Figure 7. Maine Publicity Bureau, Portland, circa 1940 view (MHPC).

Chestnut Street Church Community House, 17 Chestnut Street, Portland, 1924, Extant

* Eastman Brothers and Bancroft Store, Alterations, 488-98 Congress Street, Portland, 1924, Destroyed

Pilgrim Apartment House for Clough & Maxim, 30 West Street, Portland, 1924-25, Extant

* Charles A. Plummer House, Cape Elizabeth, 1925, Not Executed

"Waldbrook", H. M. Verrill House, North Windham, 1924-25, Extant

Vernon West House, Foreside Road, Falmouth, 1925, Extant

Spaulding Bisbee House, 31 Foreside Road, Cumberland, 1925, Extant

Jessie D. Wright House, 163 Western Promenade, Portland, 1926, Extant

Ricker Apartments for Dartmouth Realty, 290 Baxter Boulevard, Portland, 1926-27, Extant

Servants and Chauffeur's Garage for H.H.Pierce, West Baldwin, 1926-27, Extant

American Legion Building, Westbrook, 1927, Not Located

Commercial Building for R. H. Rines, 639 Congress Street, Portland, 1927, Destroyed

* Guy P. Gannett House, 882 Shore Road, Cape Elizabeth, 1927, Extant

* James C. Hamlen House, 15 Chadwick Street, Portland, 1927, Extant

Maine Theater Building, 639 Congress Street, Portland, 1927, Destroyed

Warren School Addition, Westbrook, 1927, Not Built

Fidelity Trust Co. Bank, Yarmouth, 1927, Altered

YMCA Building, 70 Forest Avenue, Portland, 1927, Extant

Walter G. Davis House, 402 Old Ocean Rd., Cape Elizabeth, 1927-28, Extant

Fidelity Trust Company Bank, 2 Cottage St., South Portland, 1927-28, Extant

Bonnie Memorial Library, Cornish, 1928, Extant

W. W. Bullibant Cottage, East Marion, 1928, Not Located

* Philip Dana House, Cape Elizabeth, 1928, Not Located

* Robert Hale House, Alterations, 290 Danforth Street, Portland, 1928, Destroyed

J. C. Hazzard Swimming Pool, Grand Beach, Old Orchard, 1928, Destroyed

Robert P. Hazzard, Jr., House, 64 Winter St., Gardiner, 1928, Extant

* Ernest A. Randall House, Foreside Road, Falmouth, 1928, Not Located

Frank W. Spencer Cottage, Boothbay Harbor, 1928, Not Located

* Carroll Mansion, Alterations, 79 Park Street, Portland, 1928, Altered

Zeta Psi Fraternity, 19 College Street, Brunswick, 1928-29, Extant

E. Farrington Abbott Cottage, South Harpswell, 1929, Not Located

William D. Ireland House, Foreside Road, Cumberland, 1929, Not Located

Gardiner Public Library Addition, Gardiner, 1929, Extant

P. W. Sprague House, Prouts Neck, 1929, Not Executed

Philip S. Wilder House, 27 McKen Street, Brunswick, 1929, Extant

Misses Talfourd House, Ogunquit, 1929, Not Located

Canal National Bank, 186 Middle St., Portland, 1929-30, Extant
 YWCA Building, Union Street, Bangor, 1929-30, Extant
 Donald W. Philbrook House, 21 Oakhurst Road, Cape Elizabeth, 1929-30, Extant
 Henry P. Rines House, 15 Cragmoore, Cape Elizabeth, 1929-30, Extant
 Beaver Valley Water Company Office, 1425 8th Avenue, Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, 1929-30, Altered
 Shenango Valley Water Company Office, 100 Shenango Avenue, Sharon, Pennsylvania, 1929-30, Extant
 Dr. H. L. Appollonio House and Hospital, Boothbay Harbor, 1930, Not Executed
 * Henry G. Byers Guest House, 450 Mitchell Road, Cape Elizabeth, 1930, Not Located
 High School Building, Falmouth, 1930; addition in 1935, Extant
 * Davis & Caitland Store, 210 Middle Street, Portland, 1930, Destroyed
 William P. Viles House, 71 Stone Street, Augusta, 1930, Extant
 Mrs. T. T. Watson Cottage, Alterations, South Harpswell, 1930, Not Executed
 Maine Publishing Company Garage Addition, 177 Federal Street, Portland, 1930, Not Located
 V. D. Irish House, Alt., Cumberland Foreside, 1930-31, Not Located
 * Maine Savings Bank Office, Alterations, 536 Congress Street, Portland, 1931, Destroyed
 Walter W. Wyman House, Alterations, 121 Sewall Street, Augusta, 1931, Destroyed
 Store and Bank for W. F. Senter, 112 Maine Street, Brunswick, 1931-32, Extant
 Post Office Building, Sanford, 1931-32, Extant
 * Stanley Fogg House, Alterations, 150 Neal Street, Portland, 1932, Extant
 Addition to Unidentified Hotel, Kennebunk, 1932, Not Located
 Portland Water District Spa, Union Station, Portland, 1932, Destroyed
 * Maine Savings Bank Office Alterations, 244 Middle Street, Portland, 1932, Destroyed
 A. M. Lothrop House, Alterations, Belfast, 1933, Not Located
 * Roger Snow House, Alterations, Falmouth, 1933
 Cecil Holmes House, 60 Spring Street, Brunswick, c. 1933, Extant
 Mrs. Helen J. Chase House, Alterations, Farmington, 1935, Not Located
 William B. Goodwin House, Alterations, Prouts Neck, 1935, Extant
 Houses and Hospital, Quoddy Village, Eastport, 1935, Partially Extant
 Houses and Actors Bungalow, Lakewood, Madison, 1936, Extant

Guido J. Arzonico House, Alterations, 81 West Main Street, Yarmouth, 1936, Not Identified
 * Dr. S. J. Beach House, Alterations, 20 Cragmoor, Cape Elizabeth, 1936, Extant
 * Maine 44 Corporation Store, Peaks Island, 1936, Not Located
 Maine Publicity Bureau Building, 3 St. John Street, Portland, 1936, Extant
 Sebago Congregational Church, Alterations, 1936, Not Identified
 N. Brooke Smith House, Alterations, 69 Federal Street, Brunswick, 1936, Extant
 * Miss Louise Dana House, Alterations, Not Located
 * Dr. C. H. Gordon House, Alterations, 67 Beacon Street, Portland, 1937, Not Located
 * Robert Hale Cottage, Alterations, Cushing's Island, Portland, 1937, Extant
 Mrs. Wheelock Whitney House, Wayzata, Minnesota, 1937, Not Located
 Maine Savings Bank, Temporary Office, 23-25 Canal Street, Portland, 1940, Destroyed
 Nordica Memorial Museum, Farmington, c1940, Not Built
 E. E. Sanders House, Alterations, Gloucester Road, North Yarmouth, 1941, Not Located
 Hotel for J. W. Freeman, Sebago, No Date, Not Located
 Mrs. Francis A. Hunt Camp, East Winthrop, No Date, Not Located
 * Mrs. R. E. Bates House, Alterations, Birch Knolls, Cape Elizabeth, No Date, Not Executed
 Center Conway Library, Conway, New Hampshire, No Date, Not Executed
 * Dr. Varamée House, Alterations, 17 Carleton Street, Portland, No Date, Not Executed
 Rines Mausoleum, Evergreen Cemetery, Portland, No Date, Extant
 * C. H. Robinson, Jr. House, Cupola Addition, Cape Elizabeth, No Date, Extant
 Clinton Davis Summer House, Cape Elizabeth
 John Decker House, Cape Elizabeth
 Charles Emerson House, Cape Elizabeth
 William Widgery Thomas, Jr. Monument, Evergreen Cemetery, Portland, Extant
 * Architectural drawings in the collection of the Maine Historical Society, Portland

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